

## How To... Be a Tour Guide

**In our first blog post of the year, Dr Imogen Wegman provides a guide to tour guiding. Imogen, who recently completed her PhD in History at the University of Tasmania, talks about the joys and frustrations of leading tour groups, explains how it can improve your skills as a scholar and communicator, and shares some selections from her collection of memorable moments.**

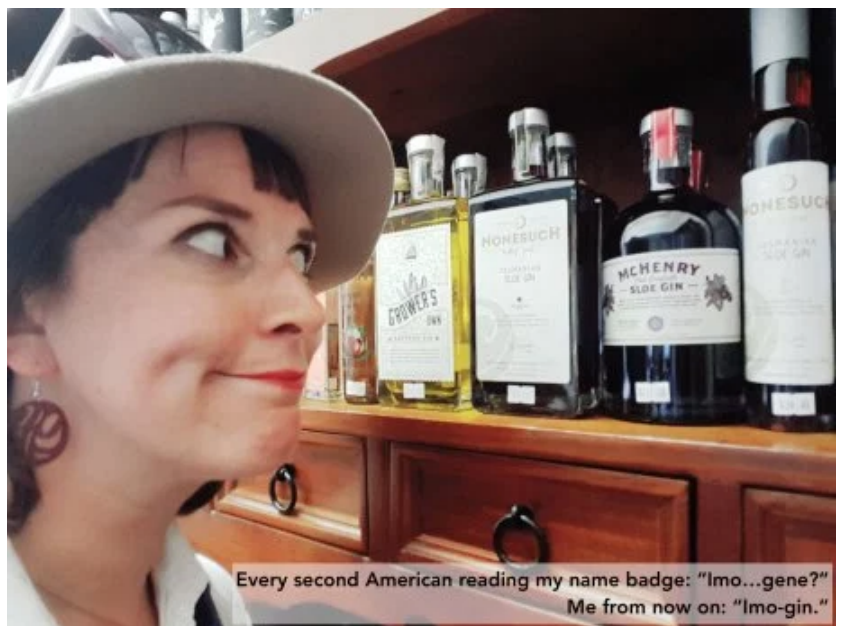
*An older man stands in front of the cells in the Port Arthur Penitentiary, admiring the ruins of the stone walls and floors. He turns to his family, clearly proud about deducing the purpose of these small rooms. He declares them to be shower cubicles. As a tour guide, there are times to feign deafness, but some things cannot be ignored. I step forward, "Uh, sir, these were the cells, where the prisoners were kept, where they slept. Not showers." He insists, pointing at the little stone shelf built into the wall, "Showers! For the soap!" His companions look on, uncertain who to believe. I try once more, this time showing him the illustrated information board. "See?" No. I would not be winning that battle. Another guest calls for my attention, and with some relief I move away.*

For the past six summers I have worked as a tour guide in Hobart, taking guests from the cruise ships that visit our harbour out to experience some of southern Tasmania's heritage, culture and food. This was a welcome break as I researched and wrote my thesis. But it was more than a change of scene. I started tour guiding and my PhD in the same summer, and I quickly found it to be an extension of my academic work. With limited opportunities for teaching within the university, guiding is an effective place to practise communicating complicated concepts to the most general of audiences.

There are lots of different types of tour guiding – site-based, themed, multi-stop, posh, regular... I usually work on tours booked onboard, chosen by guests for the stops on the route. The compulsory part of my job is to get them all back to the ship on time and in one piece. I work alongside a coach driver (although a lot of companies use driver-guides), and any talking I do en route is up to me.

Like giving a conference paper, multiplied by fifty.

Being a tour guide is not for everyone. You become a performer for a captive, but not always captivated, audience and it can be a confronting exercise. At any given moment, only half of your audience will actually be listening to you. They have come on this tour to see Australian animals or taste Tasmanian wines, not to get a history lesson. Your audience will probably have some retired academics, but it will also have young couples, eastern European oligarchs, American ranch owners, Indigenous peoples, children, and a shaky granddad sent on tour by a family who want someone else to look after him.



\*murblemutter from the back of the coach\*

Me: "Can everyone at the back hear me?"

Them shouting: "No!"

\*Twiddles mic volume\* "How about now?"

Them: "No! It's not you mate, there's a bloody rude woman on her phone and we can't hear over her!"

The questions they ask won't be theory-laden trip hazards, but they will reveal prejudices you need to decide how to address. In Tasmania I am regularly asked if this island ever had an Indigenous population. This is despite spending the first twenty minutes of the tour talking about the history of the island before 1788. Holiday brain is real, and it makes people forget everything.

You'll need a thick skin – the grumpy uncle who thinks doing a PhD is a waste of time also goes on holiday, and doesn't keep his views for the family table. My usual response to rudeness is to mentally catalogue that person and their behaviour as fodder for future dinner party stories, while tossing my head with an insincere laugh and walking away. I have an entire digital folder of amusing moments. Guests will also insist that they are right, which will equip you for dealing with those inevitable statement-questions at conferences.

### How to get into it

My mother has been guiding for the cruise ships for years, and as the new season approached in 2013 she mentioned to her bosses that I could 'talk under wet cement'. I accompanied a couple of tours to see how it worked, and then I was in. In my experience this is how a lot of the touring industry works – I have been offered tour guide positions based on an official application process, but have also seen a lot of emails from the bosses asking for new names to add to their lists.

Not everyone has a contact on the inside, but if you think you might like to get into tour guiding, start by looking on TripAdvisor for reviews of tour companies in your area, watching for clues about the guides they hire – reviewers often mention that their guide is studying if they think it affected the quality. Go on some tours and talk to the guides – they might tell you who to contact, and you'll get a feel for how the companies operate.

### Do I need tour guide training?

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. In Tasmania there are no requirements of certification, but that might vary around Australia. Even if nothing is required, it is good practice to think critically about every tour you have ever been on – what did you enjoy about the guide's performance, what not? If I have an experienced driver I'll often ask for their feedback at the end of the day. Often companies are looking for employees with some kind of heavy vehicle license, so they can talk and drive at the same time, but walking tours around our cities are getting more popular, and site-specific tours don't usually require any driving.

A couple have an album of their visit to Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary from a few years earlier. They are determined to recreate some of the photos.

Her: Where can I hold a koala bear?

Me: Oh, holding them stresses them out, but you can go and have a photo next to one.

Him: But we held one last time, here's the photo. Is that somewhere else?

Me: No, that's here, but the person holding it is an employee, and she's holding a wombat, not a koala.

Her: So you know her? Why can she hold a koala bear?

Me: Well, it's a wombat...

Her: No, it isn't.

Me: Yes, it is. They're from the same family, so they do look a little similar...

Her: But how can I hold a koala bear like she is?

Me: \*exit left, with haste\*

### So, what do I talk about?

Some companies give their guides scripts to learn and recite, but the best companies will encourage you to do some research and find new stories to tell. I have the advantage of researching Tasmanian history, so there has been a direct conversion from my thesis into a commentary. Not everyone researches local history that can feed directly into their guiding however, but we are not bound by our research topics. As trained researchers, we have the skills to filter good research from bad, fact from fiction, and I would argue that this is what makes us valuable guides.

I focus on a narrative that runs from 40,000 years ago to the late-nineteenth century. As we drive this is broken up by discussion about local landmarks and smaller stories – non-Australians love hearing about the Bunnings Onion-Sausage debacle if we go past a prominent hardware store. I try to end each of my history bits at a key point, and then pick it back up later when there's another stretch of road. I don't usually tell them explicitly about my PhD unless it comes up in conversation, although I will sometimes mention that I'm a historian.

**Listen to how your guests respond.** The questions they ask reveal a lot. Some questions will tell you they just weren't listening, but don't take that personally. There are usually some engaged guests who ask for clarification or more information. Ask yourself if that meant you used too much jargon, or didn't explain a fundamental concept? In my first tours I heard a lot of surprise that convicts would receive land grants, because I hadn't properly explained that the earliest convicts sent to the colonies were young, fertile, healthy, and chosen to populate and build a new centre of British control. Generally I try to remain neutral, aware that every tour group includes a broad political spectrum. I am unwilling to spark off a fight in a fully-packed coach.

**Find a balance between simplification and too much detail.** Credit your group with some brains, and remember that often people think history is boring because of the way it's told, rather than the content. Tell some humorous stories, a bit of mild gore, some adventure, but do what we are trained to do – use it to illustrate a larger point about the convict system, supply shortages, whatever part of the history you are up to. Practise using humour to make a serious point, but be careful and be receptive to the response. If something doesn't work, try telling it differently next time – you will end up on the same route hundreds of times, use that to refine and hone your skills.

**Be aware of what your guest is actually asking.** They will ask questions that seem dumb, but consider what might be pushing that question – what basic principle might they not be familiar with? This applies also in academia, where we tend to assume understanding as we work with expert audiences, which can be frustrating for newbies to the field. View your topic as an outsider would. For Americans this might be the role of a governor within Commonwealth countries, for older Australians it might relate to mid-twentieth century school lessons about the 'extinction' of the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples.

A conversation I have at least once every tour

A: I'm looking for Bus 7.

Me: Yep, you're with me, on this one here.

A: This one?

Me: Yes, this is number 7.

A: You're sure?

Me: Yes.

A: Honey, she says this is our bus.

B: Number 7? This one here?

A: Apparently.

B: This is our bus?

Me: Yes! Number 7!

B: Oh. OK.

This job has been met by some academics with scorn – recently on hearing that I had started a few regular jobs post-PhD, someone commented that I ‘must be able to stop with all that tour guide stuff now.’ But with every tour I am becoming a better communicator of history. I am nowhere near perfect, but I do credit this job with improving my written and oral storytelling skills. So, every time someone tells me they’d learned something new, has an engaged question, or asks for a book recommendation to learn more, I do a little happy dance because what I’m doing might just work.

---

## Share

 (<https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2019/02/15/how-to-be-a-tour-guide/?share=email&nb=1>)

Like



One blogger likes this.

---

## Related

[Emerging Historians—Gwyn McClelland](#)  
(<https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/201...historians-gwyn-mcclelland/>)  
In "Academic history"

[Emerging Historians—Dr Ben Wilkie](#)  
(<https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/201...historians-dr-ben-wilkie/>)  
In "Academic history"

[Emerging Historians—Heather Clarke](#)  
(<https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/201...historians-heather-clarke/>)  
In "Australian history"

---

Written by [andrebrettp.](https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/author/andrebrettp/) (<https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/author/andrebrettp/>) — Posted in [Academic history](#) (<https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/category/academic-history/>), [Australian history](#) (<https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/category/australian-history/>), [Hot Tips for ECRs](#) (<https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/category/hot-tips-for-ecrs/>), [How To...](#) (<https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/category/how-to/>), [Public history](#) (<https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/category/public-history/>).

## 2 comments



FEBRUARY 15, 2019 - 12:58 PM

[Carol](http://cjr5711.wordpress.com) [.\(http://cjr5711.wordpress.com\)](http://cjr5711.wordpress.com).

Great job, Imogen. Sounds like you have it all covered. I've come across most of these situations as well, taking tour groups around the Hawkesbury (except for the koala episode). Well done and good luck for the future with your PhD. Regards, Carol.



[.\(https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2019/02/15/how-to-be-a-tour-guide/?like\\_comment=188&\\_wpnonce=e7f467507f\)](https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2019/02/15/how-to-be-a-tour-guide/?like_comment=188&_wpnonce=e7f467507f)

Liked by [1 person](#) [.#](#).



FEBRUARY 15, 2019 - 1:45 PM

[Hanne Nielsen](https://plus.google.com/102710368920105797281) [.\(https://plus.google.com/102710368920105797281\)](https://plus.google.com/102710368920105797281).

Thanks for sharing your thoughts on this, Imogen! I agree that working as a tour guide can be really helpful in academic life, and vice versa. Many of the skills are transferrable – plus the guiding side helps you reach a much wider audience than the average scholarly publication ever will. It's all about traversing the same knowledge terrain using different scales!



[.\(https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2019/02/15/how-to-be-a-tour-guide/?like\\_comment=189&\\_wpnonce=061e1b40e6\)](https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2019/02/15/how-to-be-a-tour-guide/?like_comment=189&_wpnonce=061e1b40e6)

Liked by [1 person](#) [.#](#).

[School's out for summer?](https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2018/12/21/schools-out-for-summer/) [.\(https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2018/12/21/schools-out-for-summer/\)](https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2018/12/21/schools-out-for-summer/).

[How To... Present a Conference Paper](https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2019/02/25/how-to-present-a-conference-paper/) [.\(https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2019/02/25/how-to-present-a-conference-paper/\)](https://ahaecr.wordpress.com/2019/02/25/how-to-present-a-conference-paper/).